

# The Impact of Spokes-Characters on Customer Loyalty

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship among spokes-characters and customer loyalty. To reach the purpose, a conceptual model has been constructed, with three variables, including spokes-characters, customer loyalty and brand trust. Specifically, spokes-characters (SC) is designed as the independent variable, brand trust (BT) as the mediating variable, and customer loyalty (CL) as dependent variable. This study has collected 332 effective samples both online and offline. All the respondents are common consumers with consumption experience. The collected data was processed and analyzed by regression analysis and structural equation modeling with SPSS and AMOS software. The result of this study indicated that spokes-characters have significant impact to customer loyalty, and brand trust has mediating effect on the relationship between spokes-characters and customer loyalty. These finding are important to brand promotion of companies, which suggest that spokes-characters can also play a positive role and marketing managers should attach more importance to spokes-characters.

**Keywords:** spokes-characters, customer loyalty, brand trust, mediating effect

## 1. Introduction

Brand, loyalty has always been the popular business keywords, and business managers are always thinking about how to shape a good brand image and improve customer loyalty (Deng, Tao & Ma, 2004). The increasingly fierce competition and the homogenization of trend in product have made this problem harder. Since 1980s, brand economy and consumer age have begun. Consumers no longer only cares about price or quality of the products, but gradually take the product brand as a basis for decision-making of buying behavior (Aaker, 1991). On this background, how to shape a good image of brand to impress consumers and promote customer loyalty, have become a core question that entrepreneurs must think twice. Companies have resorted to all means to solve this problem, by taking brand marketing as an important strategy, being committed to brand packaging and publicity.

One of the best practices for entrepreneurs to brand marketing is to shape a spokesperson with fame. Star spokesperson is well-known to consumers, and is widely used in marketing. Spokesperson strategy is working benefiting from their influence and appeal. However, scholars have pointed out that the success of spokesperson is due to a special economic system (Dong & Jin, 1991), in which consumers can easily pick the spokesperson brand up from a number of brands. However, countless star spokesperson appear, so that consumers gradually feel numb and aesthetic fatigue. In addition, star spokesperson has many uncertain and uncontrollable factors, which may even have a negative impact to brands. Studies have proved that consumers will passed their dissatisfaction with the spokesperson to the brand or product (Peng & Cao, 2011). In order to make up for some of the shortcomings of star spokesperson, many companies choose to use spokes-characters to carry out brand promotion. Spokes-characters is a symbolic symbol of human or other biology to deliver message of personality, culture, and value of a brand, and it is an important part of intangible assets of enterprises (Zhang, 2013). There are many successful examples in marketing practice, such as Disney Mickey Mouse, McDonald, Haier brothers and so on. It is worth mentioning that ten outstanding brands that "Advertising Age" voted are all spokes-characters.

Spokes-characters have become an important role in brand strategy. As a result, people in both practice and academic areas pay more and more attention to spokes-characters.

Therefore, how to shape suitable spokes-characters, to develop a good brand image, to get consumer trust, to improve loyalty, is the crucial issue for the enterprises. As domestic research in this area is relatively scarce, this study aims to explore the relationship among spokes-characters and customer loyalty and answer the question listing below:

- (1) Whether spokes-characters significantly affect customer loyalty?
- (2) Whether brand trust has mediating effect in the relationship between spokes-characters and customer loyalty?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Spokes-characters

The emergence and development of the brand gave birth to brand spokesperson. Mowen and Brown (1980) considered that spokesperson refers to those who express their own identity with product or brand in the advertisement, which will influence the consumer's attitude towards the advertisement. Zhou (2009) thought that the spokesperson could pass positive information of the brand to the consumers, and their brand recognition and consumer behavior would be impacted. Kamen, Azhari, & Kragh (1979) divided spokesperson into four types according to their role in advertising, including testimonial, endorser, actor, and spokesperson. Some researches classified spokesperson based on their social identities, including stars, specialist, consumer, enterprise CEO, third-party organization, etc. (Freiden, 1984; Dwane, Abhijit, 2001; Callcott, Alvey, 1991).

In addition to real people, virtual image can also play the role of brand spokesperson to achieve the effect of publicity. Aaker (1991) pointed out that brand spokesperson is a general concept, which should include some virtual cartoon image that also can provide special information for the brand or product delivery service. Callcott and Alvey (1991) argued that spokes-characters is a non-humanized role that a business uses for promotion of a product or brand. Judith and Ronald (2004) deemed that spokes-characters not only include some non-human virtual characters, but also some virtual human roles, such as Ronald McDonald, who is not real, but modeled on human beings. Spokes-characters have been applied in marketing for a long history and have obtained significant effects. Besides, spokes-characters belongs to the enterprise's intangible assets, which is designed based on the background of enterprise, to convey the unique spirit or personality of the brand (Callcott, Lee, 1984; Callcott, Phillips, 2001). Additional, some scholars defined spokes-characters from the perspective of symbolic analysis. Zhou (2008) said spokes-characters uses image of human or other biological image as a special brand symbol. Zhang (2013) defined that spokes-characters is a symbolic symbol of human or other biology to deliver message of personality, culture, and value of a brand, and it is an important part of intangible assets of enterprises. This study agrees with Zhang Ning's definition of spokes-characters.

There are a lot of research on the attributes of spokes-characters. Some empirical studies already have proved that some attributes of spokes-characters, including credibility, attractiveness, expertise, likability, nostalgia, trustworthiness and relevance, have significantly effect on customer's brand awareness and purchase behavior (Callcott, Lee, 1994; Spears, Mowen & Chakraborty, 1996; Judith, Ronald, 2004).

Callcott and Alvey (1991) ascribed the good propaganda of spokes-characters to its nostalgia. Further, Callcott and Phillips (1996) shows that, in addition to nostalgia, expertise and relevance to the product can also influence the propaganda of spokes-characters. Swami (2008) found that the attractiveness and friendliness attributes were also factors that influenced consumer attitudes towards the brand. Garretson and Niedrich (2004) found that credibility has a significant impact on the consumer's brand attitude, nostalgia and expertise affect credibility, and relevance has no significant effect on credibility. Chang (2008) revised the model proposed by Garretson and Niedrich (2004) and considered that the perception of spokes-characters is a second-order factor, manifested as three first-order factors: likability, relevance and expertise. Among them, likability is the most important factor, followed by relevance and expertise. This study refers to Chang (2008) of the dimension of spokes-characters.

### 2.2 Customer Loyalty

At the beginning, scholars tend to explain the customer loyalty from the behavior point of view, that high-frequency of continuous purchase is customer loyalty. Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) directly regarded over three times of buying as the performance of customer loyalty. However, some scholars argued that these kind of definitions only focus on the purchase behavior of consumers but the mental activity, so attitudinal loyalty is came up. Bowen (1952) pointed out that customer loyalty also shows that consumers are willing to be part of the brand. Besides, there are some definitions are based on both behavior and mental activity. Gremler and Brown (1996) thought that loyalty is continuous buying and positive evaluation to a brand and its products, and customers will continue to buy when they add new products.

What are the factors that affect and drive customer loyalty? In fact, many scholars have discussed this, but so far, no unified understanding has arrived. The study summarized several factors including customer satisfaction and customer trust.

There are a lot of research that prove customer satisfaction will affect customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction theory advocates that, customer satisfaction is an important driver of customer loyalty, which facilitates and maintains loyalty, the customer is more satisfied, continued purchase will be more, and loyalty will be more persistent (Kotler, 1973). Zhang, Tian, & Zhu (2003) confirmed the relationship between perceived performance, satisfaction and loyalty. Ma and Zhang's (2003) analysis of factors affecting customer Loyalty has confirmed that customer satisfaction is one of the important factors.

Moorman, Christine & Zaltman (1992) defined trust as one party willing to trust the other party. From a sociological point of view, the trust relationship between a consumer and an organization or brand can produce a deeper benefit than satisfaction (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998). Fowler (2003) used empirical studies to demonstrate a significant positive relationship between trust and loyalty. Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh. (1987) considers that trust is the main driver of consumers' decision to maintain a long-term relationship.

### 2.3 Brand Trust

Trust is used widely in the field of psychology, social sciences and so on. Rotter (1967) defines trust from a psychological point of view as individual expectation to be able to trust others. Worchel (1979) analyzes trust from the perspective of social science: individuals want to be able to rely on others while perceiving the existence of risk, which is based on the understanding of others.

The definition of brand trust, scholars gave on previous understanding of the trust. Lau and Lee (1999) argues that brand trust is the willingness of consumers to trust a brand when they perceive the risk, which is due to their positive expectation to the brand. Delgado, Munuera and Yagüe (2003) consider that brand trust is a sense of security that consumers gain from a brand. Yuan (2007) regards brand trust is the willingness of consumers to recognize a brand whiling perceiving risk, which is based on the positive expectations of the brand's quality and its fulfillment.

Studies on the dimension of brand trust, roughly is divided into three cases: one dimension, two dimensions, and three dimensions. The two-dimensional structure is used most widely. Erden and Swait (1998) proposed a two-dimensional structural model, including trustworthiness (how much is the brand willing to fulfill the commitment to consumer) and expertise (the ability that brand can fulfill the commitment to consumer). Besides, Delgado-Ballester (2003) developed a two-dimensional structure of brand trust, including brand reliability and brand intentionality. Brand liability refers to the ability of the brand itself to achieve commitment to the consumer, and brand intentionality is how fit between brand and the consumer. This article refers to the brand trust two-dimensional structure that Delgado-Ballester put forward.

## 3. Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

### 3.1 Theoretical Model

According to the theory of "Cognition-Emotion-Behavior" in the field of psychology, consumers can be aware of spokes-characters and their attributes, and form a pleasant emotion, as well as a deep impression, during the consumption of the brand product or service, which will be ultimately contributed to loyalty.

Because spokes-characters does not really exist, but is a virtual cartoon image. The specificity may influence customer loyalty through the brand. That is, the consumer's attitude to spokes-characters may be transferred to its brand, and then affect the customer Loyalty.

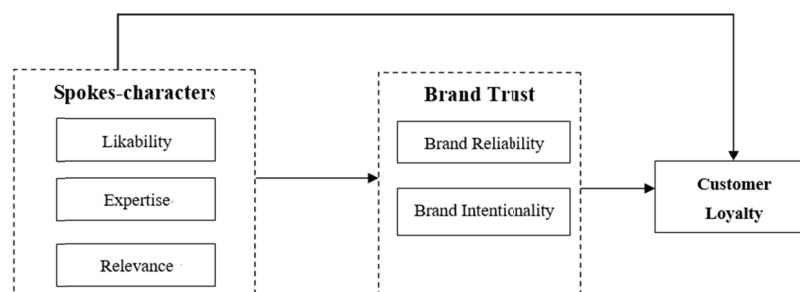


Figure 1 Theoretical model of this study

In summary, this paper constructs a conceptual model with attributes of spokes-characters, brand trust and customer loyalty, as shown in Figure 3-1. Specifically, three dimensions (likability, expertise, relevance) of spokes-characters are independent variables, two dimensions of brand trust (brand reliability and brand intentionality) are mediating variable, and customer loyalty is dependent variable.

### 3.2 Hypotheses

#### 3.2.1 Relationship between Spokes-Characters and Customer Loyalty

Spokes-characters is a special form of the spokesperson. Many studies have shown that spokes-characters can help consumers have a good understanding to the brand, and improve acceptance and purchase intention of consumers (Judith, Folse, Netemeyer, & Scot, 2012; Mize, Kinney, 2008). The spokes-characters represents the image of the brand. Lin (2012) believes that consumer will have a deep impression to likability of the spokes-characters. Chang (2008) confirms that consumers can perceive the attributions of spokes-characters, like likability, expertise, relevance. Therefore, this paper thinks that the attributes of spokes-characters will positively affect customer loyalty, and raises the following assumptions:

H1: The attributes of spokes-characters have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty: the higher likability, the higher customer loyalty (H1a); the higher expertise, the higher customer loyalty (H1b); the higher relevance, the higher customer loyalty (H1c).

#### 3.2.2 Relationship between Spokes-Characters and Brand Trust

Some scholars believe that if the consumer is satisfied with the spokes-characters, they will endorse the brand. The spokes-characters, to some extent, represents the image of a brand. Zeithaml (1988) points that consumers tend to judge whether a brand is trustworthy in two ways. The first is the inherent characteristics of the brand, and the second is some external features such as historical background, visibility, and spokesperson, etc. Therefore, consumers will observe the attributes of spokes-characters, such as likability, expertise, relevance and others, to reduce the uncertainty of the brand, and form the brand awareness, and improve the favor to the brand (Dwane,1999). Therefore, spokes-characters has become one of the important factors for consumer's trust. Therefore, this paper thinks that the attributes of spokes-characters will positively affect brand trust, and raises the following assumptions:

H2: The attributes of spokes-characters have a significant positive impact on brand reliability: the higher likability, the higher brand reliability (H2a); the higher expertise, the higher brand reliability (H2b); the higher relevance, the higher brand reliability (H2c).

H3: The attributes of spokes-characters have a significant positive impact on brand intentionality: the higher likability, the higher brand intentionality (H3a); the higher expertise, the higher brand intentionality (H3b); the higher relevance, the higher brand intentionality (H3c).

#### 3.2.3 Relationship between Brand Trust and Customer Loyalty

Lau and Lee (1999) show that brand trust can significantly affect brand loyalty. Delgado-Ballester (2003) found that brand trust can significantly affect loyalty, and further, loyalty will have an impact on brand equity in an empirical study of brand trust and assets. Sweeney and Swait (2008) found that the higher reliability of the brand, the consumer is more willing to express loyalty. Therefore, this paper thinks that brand trust will positively affect customer loyalty, and raises the following assumptions:

H4: Brand trust have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty

H4a: Brand reliability have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty

H4b: Brand intentionality have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty

#### 3.2.3 Mediate Effect of Brand Trust

Many researches have confirmed that spokes-characters represents the image of a brand, which will affect the consumer's perception of the quality of the brand, and further will affect customer loyalty. Dipayan, Abhijit & Neel (2006) have shown that spokes-characters will make consumers have a deep impression of the brand, and enhance recognition and trust to the brand and product, so that consumers are more likely to generate a continuous purchase, and loyalty.

H5: Brand reliability have mediate impact on the relationship between attributes of spokes-characters and customer loyalty

H5a: Brand reliability have mediate impact on the relationship between likability and customer loyalty

H5b: Brand reliability have mediate impact on the relationship between expertise and customer loyalty

H5c: Brand reliability have mediate impact on the relationship between relevance and customer loyalty

H6: Brand intentionality have mediate impact on the relationship between attributes of spokes-characters and customer loyalty

H6a: Brand intentionality have mediate impact on the relationship between likability and customer loyalty

H6b: Brand intentionality have mediate impact on the relationship between expertise and customer loyalty

H6c: Brand intentionality have mediate impact on the relationship between relevance and customer loyalty

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1 Samples and Measures

This study takes the consumers as the respondents. To ensure the representativeness of the subjects, this study selected China's largest online questionnaire survey platform "SOJUMP" (website: <http://www.Sojump.com/>) to conduct a questionnaire survey. SOJUMP has a sample library with 2.6 million members, related to all age groups, industry, having a high representativeness.

A total of 356 questionnaires were collected from the survey. Then some invalid questionnaires were removed for the purification after the code. Finally, 332 valid questionnaires were selected and the effective rate was 93.2%. The demographic information of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information

	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	182	51.1
	Female	174	48.9
Age	<=20	34	10.24
	21-30	167	50.30
	31-40	112	33.73
	>40	19	5.72
Education	Middle school	0	0.00
	High school or secondary school	5	1.51
	Post-secondary school	21	6.33
	Undergraduate	138	41.57
	Graduate	168	50.60

The operational definition and scale of variables have a decisive effect on the results of the study. Therefore, the measurement of the variables in this study are all authority scales, to meet the requirements of content validity. In addition, scales were used Likert5-points measure. The interviewees express their consent to the question by checking the number 1-5.

The scale of attributes of spokes-characters refers to the research of Zhang (2013), including 10 items. A sample item is: "That spokes-character is likable"; the scale of customer loyalty refers to the research of Yoo and Donthu (2001), including three items. A sample item is: "I am a loyal customer of that brand"; the scale of brand trust refers to the research of Delgado-Ballester (2013), including six items. A sample item is: "I am very confident about the products of that brand".

##### 4.2 Preliminary Research

This study did a pre-research within a small scope, to ensure effectiveness of the various questions by doing EFA test with the data. The EFA test result is shown in the table 2. As we can see, the variable of spokes-character has rotated three factors, customer loyalty has rotated one factor, and brand trust has rotated two, which indicates the scales have good validity.

Table 2. EFA test result of preliminary research

Variable		item	1	2	3	Variable		item	1	
Spokes-characters	likability	L1	0.222	0.092	0.813	Customer loyalty		CL1	0.831	
		L2	0.224	0.176	0.790			CL2	0.833	
		L3	0.044	0.349	0.673			CL3	0.812	
expertise		E1	0.776	0.131	0.253	Brand	KMO		0.696	
		E2	0.714	0.321	0.130		Variable	item	1	2
		E3	0.537	0.190	0.268		Brand reliability	BF1	0.742	0.194
		E4	0.858	0.110	0.019		Trust	BF2	0.787	0.251
relevance		R1	0.180	0.850	0.188			BF3	0.774	0.131
		R2	0.303	0.708	0.163		Brand	BI1	0.333	0.643
		R3	0.154	0.806	0.219		intentionality	BI1	0.150	0.852
KMO			0.841				BI1	0.145	0.799	
						KMO		0.788		

## 5. Data Analysis

### 5.1 Reliability, Validity and Correlation

Reliability analysis refers to the possibility of using the same observation method to obtain similar observations (results) for the same subject. In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was used to measure the internal reliability of the scale. It is generally acknowledged, the greater Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , the better the internal reliability. The result of reliability of this study is shown in table 3. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of all the variables are greater than 0.6, indicating that the collected data has good internal reliability.

Table 3. EFA test result of preliminary research

Variable and dimensions		Item	CITC	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<b>Spokes-characters</b>	Likability	L1	0.589	0.593	<b>0.728</b>
		L2	0.591	0.588	
		L3	0.473	0.728	
	Expertise	E1	0.600	0.691	<b>0.766</b>
		E2	0.600	0.691	
		E3	0.478	0.753	
	Relevance	E4	0.592	0.698	<b>0.784</b>
		R1	0.683	0.643	
		R2	0.570	0.767	
<b>Customer loyalty</b>		R3	0.620	0.712	<b>0.762</b>
		CL1	0.590	0.686	
		CL2	0.510	0.752	
<b>Brand trust</b>	Brand reliability	CL3	0.585	0.693	<b>0.776</b>
		BF1	0.662	0.641	
		BF2	0.549	0.765	
	Brand intentionality	BF3	0.634	0.674	<b>0.681</b>
		BI1	0.451	0.640	
		BI2	0.558	0.499	
		BI3	0.477	0.610	

Validity is the degree that the measurement tool can accurately measure what is required, including content validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

On content validity. Since the measuring items used in this study are from the mature scale developed and verified by predecessors, content validity is good.

On convergent validity. This study measures convergent validity by the value of CR and AVE (also called CFA test). Generally, if CR is greater than 0.6, and AVE is greater than 0.5, the convergent validity is regarded as good. The result of CFA is shown in table 4, we can learn from the result that CR and AVE of all variables are

up to standard. Therefore, convergent validity is good.

Table 4. Result of CFA model

Variable	Item	Factor Loading	1-SMC	CR	AVE
Likability	L1	0.752	0.434	0.749	0.501
	L2	0.762	0.419		
	L3	0.597	0.644		
Expertise	E1	0.733	0.463	0.803	0.505
	E2	0.730	0.467		
	E3	0.685	0.531		
	E4	0.692	0.521		
Relevance	R1	0.851	0.276	0.790	0.559
	R2	0.649	0.579		
	R3	0.730	0.467		
Customer loyalty	CL1	0.709	0.497	0.763	0.519
	CL2	0.748	0.440		
	CL3	0.702	0.507		
Brand reliability	BF1	0.816	0.334	0.780	0.545
	BF2	0.627	0.607		
	BF3	0.758	0.425		
Brand intentionality	BI1	0.760	0.422	0.761	0.518
	BI2	0.787	0.381		
	BI3	0.598	0.642		
Fit Index	χ2/df=1.416; RMSEA=0.035; GFI=0.943; AGFI=0.921; CFI=0.975; NFI=0.920				

On discriminant validity. This study measures discriminant validity by comparing the value of AVE with the standardized coefficient (observed variable and other variables). Generally, if AVE is greater than standardized coefficient, the convergent validity is regarded as good. The result of discriminant validity is shown in table 5; we can learn from the result that all the AVE are greater than standardized coefficient. Therefore, discriminant validity is good.

Table 5. Result of discriminant validity

Variable	1.	2	3	4	5	6
1. Likability	<b>0.501</b>					
2. Expertise	0.191	<b>0.505</b>				
3. Relevance	0.218	0.197	<b>0.559</b>			
4. Customer loyalty	0.276	0.255	0.321	<b>0.519</b>		
5. Brand reliability	0.222	0.226	0.243	0.310	<b>0.545</b>	
6.Brand intentionality	0.248	0.280	0.228	0.236	0.182	<b>0.518</b>

Before regression analysis, this paper first did a correlation analysis. The result is shown in table 6. We can see that there is a significant correlation between six variables, which provides a basis for subsequent regression analysis.

Table 6. Correlations of variables

Variable	1.	2	3	4	5	6
1. Likability	1					
2. Expertise	0.437**	1				
3. Relevance	0.467**	0.444**	1			
4. Customer loyalty	0.525**	0.505**	0.567**	1		
5. Brand reliability	0.471**	0.475**	0.493**	0.557**	1	
6.Brand intentionality	0.498**	0.529**	0.477**	0.486**	0.427**	1

## 5.2 Result of Regression Analysis

This study tests the hypothesis by regression analysis with SPSS software, to find out the relationship between attributes of spokes-characters, brand trust and customer loyalty, and verify the mediating effect of brand trust.

### 5.2.1 Linear-Regression Analysis

#### 1. Hypothesis testing of attributes of spokes-characters and customer loyalty

The multiple regression results of the attributes of spokes-characters (likability, expertise and relevance), as independent variables, and customer loyalty as dependent variable, are as table 7. We can see that the coefficient of three independent variables are significant, which proves that likability, expertise and relevance have significant and positive effect to customer loyalty. Therefore, hypothesis H1a, H1b, H1c are all passed.

Table 7. Hypothesis result between spokes-characters and customer loyalty

Variable	Standardized coefficient Beta	T	ΔF	df1	df2
Constant	0.917***	4.277			
Likability	0.261***	5.418	89.653***	3	327
Expertise	0.241***	5.042			
Relevance	0.338***	6.951			

#### 2. Hypothesis Testing of Attributes of Spokes-Characters and Brand Trust

Similarly, the multiple regression results of the attributes of spokes-characters (likability, expertise and relevance), as independent variables, and brand trust (brand reliability, brand intentionality) as dependent variable, are as table 8 & table 9. We can see that the coefficient of all independent variables are significant, which proves that likability, expertise and relevance have significant and positive effect to brand reliability and brand intentionality. Therefore, hypothesis H2a, H2b, H2c, H3a, H3b, H3c, are all passed.

Table 8. Hypothesis result between spokes-characters and brand reliability

Variable	Standardized coefficient Beta	T	ΔF	df1	df2
Constant	1.215***	5.222			
Likability	0.232***	4.464	62.835***	3	327
Expertise	0.256***	4.974			
Relevance	0.271***	5.198			

Table 9. Hypothesis result between spokes-characters and brand intentionality

Variable	Standardized coefficient Beta	T	ΔF	df1	df2
Constant	1.164***	5.610			
Likability	0.256***	5.069	73.160***	3	327
Expertise	0.324***	6.495			
Relevance	0.213***	4.208			

#### 3. Hypothesis Testing of Brand Trust and Customer Loyalty

The multiple regression results of the brand trust (brand reliability, brand intentionality), as independent variables, and customer loyalty as dependent variable, are as table 10. We can see that the coefficient of two independent variables are significant, which proves that brand reliability and brand intentionality have significant and positive effect to customer loyalty. Therefore, hypothesis H4a, H4b are all passed.

Table 10. Hypothesis result between brand trust and customer loyalty

Variable	Standardized coefficient Beta	T	ΔF	df1	df2
Constant	0.916***	3.864			
Brand reliability	0.428***	8.948	103.354***	2	328
Brand intentionality	0.304***	6.365			



### 5.2.3 Mediating Effect Analysis

Mediating effect, that is, the independent variable affects the dependent variable through the mediating variable. The testing steps are following: 1) test if the independent variable affects the dependent variable significantly; 2) test if the independent variable affects the mediating variable significantly; 3) test if the independent variable and mediating variable affect the dependent variable significantly; 4) if step1 and step 2 are significant, then see the result of step 3. In step 3, if the coefficient of independent variable is insignificant, full mediating effect exists; if the coefficient of independent variable is significant and the value is lower, partial mediating effect exists. In this way, this study tests the mediating effect of brand trust.

#### 1. Mediating effect of brand reliability

This study first tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters and customer loyalty, and then tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters and brand reliability. Finally, we tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters+brand reliability to customer loyalty. The result can be seen in table 11. After adding brand reliability into the multiple regression model, the regression coefficients of three dimension of spokes-characters are all-significant, and lower, as well. Partial mediating effect exist. Therefore, hypothesis H5a, H5b, H5c are all passed.

Table 11. Result of mediating effect of brand reliability

Relationship among variables		Standardized Coefficient	Test results
Likability	→Customer loyalty	0.525**	Partial mediating effect
Likability	→Brand reliability	0.471***	
Likability	→Customer loyalty	0.338***	
Brand reliability	→Customer loyalty	0.399***	Partial mediating effect
Expertise	→Customer loyalty	0.506***	
Expertise	→Brand reliability	0.478***	
Expertise	→Customer loyalty	0.310***	Partial mediating effect
Brand reliability	→Customer loyalty	0.410***	
Relevance	→Customer loyalty	0.567***	
Relevance	→Brand reliability	0.493***	Partial mediating effect
Relevance	→Customer loyalty	0.386***	
Brand reliability	→Customer loyalty	0.367***	

#### 2. Mediating effect of brand intentionality

This study first tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters and customer loyalty, and then tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters and brand intentionality. Finally, we tests the regression coefficients of the three dimensions of spokes-characters + intentionality to customer loyalty. The result can be seen in table 12. After adding brand intentionality into the multiple regression model, the regression coefficients of three dimension of spokes-characters are all-significant, and lower, as well. Partial mediating effect exist. Therefore, hypothesis H6a, H6b, H6c are all passed.

Table 12. Result of mediating effect of brand intentionality

Relationship among variables		Standardized Coefficient	Test results
Likability	→Customer loyalty	0.525**	Partial mediating effect
Likability	→Brand intentionality	0.498***	
Likability	→Customer loyalty	0.376***	
Brand intentionality	→Customer loyalty	0.299***	Partial mediating effect
Expertise	→Customer loyalty	0.506***	
Expertise	→Brand intentionality	0.531***	
Expertise	→Customer loyalty	0.345***	Partial mediating effect
Brand intentionality	→Customer loyalty	0.304***	
Relevance	→Customer loyalty	0.567***	
Relevance	→Brand intentionality	0.477***	Partial mediating effect
Relevance	→Customer loyalty	0.434***	
Brand intentionality	→Customer loyalty	0.280***	

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Theoretical Implications

H1 predicted that the attributes of spokes-characters have significant effect on customer loyalty and corresponding hypothesis was supported. That is, the higher likability/expertise/relevance, the higher customer loyalty, which is consistent with the current researches (Judith, Folse, Netemeyer, & Scot, 2012; Mize, Kinney, 2008).

H2 and H3 predicted that the attributes of spokes-characters have significant effect on brand trust, and corresponding hypothesis was supported. That is, the higher likability/expertise/relevance, the higher brand reliability/ brand intentionality, which is consistent with the current researches (Zeithaml, 1988; Dwane, 1999).

H4 predicted that brand trust have significant effect on customer loyalty and corresponding hypothesis was supported. That is, the higher brand reliability/ brand intentionality, the higher customer loyalty, which is consistent with the current researches (Delgado-Ballester, 2003; Sweeneya, Swait, 2008).

H5 and H6 predicted that brand trust plays the mediating role in the relationship between attributes of spokes-characters and customer loyalty and corresponding hypothesis was supported. In other words, attributes of spokes-characters affects customer loyalty through brand trust, which is consistent with the current researches (Dipayan, Abhijit & Neel, 2006).

It is worth mentioning that there is no empirical study about the relationship between attributes of spokes-characters, brand trust and customer loyalty, so this study can be regarded as a fill to in this theoretical gap.

### 6.2 Practical Implications

This study brings about several practical suggestion in marketing management as follow.

- (1) Enterprises should attach importance to the role of spokes-characters. Spokes-characters is a special type of spokesperson, belonging to the intangible assets of the enterprise, and can reach the similar effect as star spokesperson in brand publicity, to enhance customer loyalty. Besides, spokes-characters has a stronger controllability than star spokesperson, and its cost is lower. Enterprises will bear lower risk of the image or financial lost causing by the sudden negative news of star spokesperson.
- (2) Enterprises should focus on some special attributes in the design of spokes-characters. This study proved that the influence that three attributes of spokes-characters affect customer loyalty are different. The biggest is relevant, followed by expertise, and likability. Additionally, the influence that three attributes of spokes-characters affect brand trust are different, too. Therefore, when enterprises consider which attribute should be focused on, they should be determined to pay more attention to which result.

### 6.2 Limitation and Further Study

Due to limit of time and effort, the study has some limitations. Firstly, the questionnaire is forwarded by friends around, so the scope may not be wide enough. In the future, we should expand the scope of interviewees, like increasing the number of interviewees in more other provinces. Besides, the model seems a little simple due to the lack of moderating variable. In the future some appropriate moderating variables are considered to be adding into the model, such as other characteristics of consumer, customer involvement and so on.

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